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3

Open Universities: A Vision for the Public University in the Twenty-first Century

Nicola Miller and John Sabapathy

Something invaluable is about to be destroyed. British universities are on the verge of losing their freedom to pursue intellectual insight through teaching and research, a freedom that for the last century has been based on the state's willingness to rely on the commitment of universities to care for their disciplines, staff and students.¹ It is this freedom to let intellectual and educational values shape their work that has made British universities among the most successful in the world. Once that freedom has been lost, it will not be recovered quickly or easily, if it can be recovered at all.

Academic freedom and intellectual creativity in Britain have been under severe pressure for several decades, but they were finally given what is likely to prove a final blow by the cumulative effect of three decisions taken by the coalition government in December 2010. The first – a near tripling of tuition fees – received much publicity; the second – an 80 per cent cut in the teaching grant – attracted less attention; the third – a dramatic increase in the proportion of research funding that will be allocated to align with 'national strategic priorities' – has gone virtually unnoticed (Mandler 2011). Yet these last two shifts in particular will radically transform the dynamics of teaching provision and research in British universities in profoundly undesirable ways that reduce higher education to a commodity. This chapter argues that a far bolder and more compelling vision of what universities can and should be in the twenty-first century is needed.

Trapped in the panopticon

Before those three decisions were taken, university teachers and researchers retained at least some freedom to organize their teaching and research on the basis of educational and intellectual values. From now on, however, student choice will determine what they teach and civil servants will direct what they research. The university will soon become the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's 'all-seeing, all-knowing' inspection-house, where teachers and thinkers are constantly surveyed and regulated in the name of efficiency. Given that our world is already so Benthamite, it is worth recalling the view of his assistant, John Stuart Mill, that in 'everything except abstract speculation', Bentham was an infant, his conceptions of human individuality the 'freaks of a pettish child' (Mill 1969: 115). Bentham's manifest failure to secure support for his panopticon prison in his own day is ironically and inversely matched by its extraordinary diffusion throughout modern society. Yet the last place Bentham would have wanted to see it implemented was the universities, which he believed should be places of free thinking, open to all without prejudice or favour.

The prospect of the panopticon is all the more appalling since this moment – between what universities could be and what they are about to be reduced to – is actually a time of extraordinary opportunity both for universities and society. The Browne Report (2010) sought a 'sustainable' future for Britain's universities: yet that report's vision is not so much sustainable as lacking in any ambition. The expansion of higher education begun in the 1980s was, regrettably, done on the cheap, which accounts for many of the problems universities currently face. However, a good deal of ground was made up during the 2000s and Britain now has a successful higher education sector, somewhat unwieldy and certainly not without its problems, but nonetheless attracting far more applications both from home and international students than it can accept. There is a tremendous appetite outside 'the academy' for deep and meaningful knowledge about the world – be that knowledge biological, astronomical, historical, literary or artistic. Look at the number of popular television or radio programmes on such subjects dependent on the academy for content and presenters. Inside universities, disciplinary self-questioning has stimulated imaginative new ways of teaching and researching many subjects. In our own field, history, scholarship is more diverse and richer today than it was fifty

or even thirty years ago. Global developments, increasing transnational movements, have also opened up many more possibilities for exchanging knowledge and ideas, which have never been so rich for so many people, both internationally and within Britain – for all the legitimate concerns about social mobility.

But with these gains have come complexities to which both academics and politicians have struggled to find good responses – or even adequate ones. Many universities, like other institutions, are now strongly international in staff and students. It no longer makes sense for them to be seen as principally, or even mainly, the intellectual underwriters of their nation-states. Yet universities have to be located somewhere and should be sufficiently valuable to the communities in which they thrive to justify public funding. Of course, as has been persuasively argued by many people, universities can contribute a great deal to stimulating good citizenship. Yet citizenship has now acquired a global as well as a national dimension.

A further complexity lies in the discrediting of the Kantian model of ‘universal reason’ that underpinned the influential German university experiments of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is now widely accepted that not only knowledge itself but also ways of knowing are profoundly shaped by the societies in which they are embedded. There are many more ways of knowing things than were dreamt of in Kant’s philosophy, an awareness that is reflected in the fertile process of rethinking disciplines and their methods that has occurred over the last few decades. This is not a ‘postmodern’ fad. Teachers are reminded of its fundamental nature every time we encounter the bemusement of an international student – whether from China, France, Hungary or the United States of America – when faced with the peculiar demands of the British essay.

Losing the illusion of a universal model of intellectual life should be more of an opportunity than a constraint. It has undeniably caused disorientation in the universities of developed countries, but it certainly does not follow that we are condemned to fragmentation, isolation and inability to communicate. There is no sense in which universities are ‘postmodern’ factories for producing greater and greater uncertainty about more and more bodies of knowledge. Rather, in reducing the scope for baldly stating how things should be, new possibilities emerge for democratically debating how things could be. Not, ‘This is the only way to know the world,’ but ‘Look what we learn from applying these approaches.’

If this seems disconcerting that is simply proof of how poorly academics and university administrators have struggled both to describe these facts and articulate some positive vision in relation to them. Politicians' and policy-makers' responses have been little better, being either crushingly instrumental in the most dispiriting way or simply incoherent. Recent governmental pronouncements on higher education's value have offered nothing more than an impoverishing sense of its contribution to UK GDP. As to incoherence, on the one hand the government has encouraged universities to 'compete globally in excellence', in the current jargon. On the other, it has jerked funding strings which yank universities towards more parochial priorities. The current pushmi-pullyu between government departments regarding foreign students' visas is just one example of this.

So it is worth stating a vision for the place of universities in society that we can support and want to fight for – specifically within a British society that is both part of our European community and of a more global civil society. The dust-storm surrounding the Browne Report has so far not provided any such compelling vision. The broader trend in university politics towards more and more concrete Benthamite panopticons is a drift towards a dystopia based on deluded fantasies of control and the mistaking of transparency for omniscience. It will produce an abdication of responsibility towards students, staff, society and the bodies of knowledge that universities have guaranteed for centuries. As language departments and science departments close across the country that effect is already demonstrably visible.

Exiting the panopticon: a new cultural contract for universities

Our vision, by contrast, is not, we believe, utopian, but one grounded in trust, responsibility and a more imaginative conception of what universities ought to be – indeed, what they already have the capacity to become. It is, above all, one in which intellectual and educational criteria are privileged before and beyond considerations of funding mechanisms, 'relevance' or the interests of self-perpetuating bureaucracies themselves. This is not because our vision disdains social 'utility', but because we believe that the best way to sustain the utility of higher education

teaching and research in the longer term is to attend to intellectual and educational concerns first and foremost, not as a secondary requisite of other priorities. A vision is needed that attends to universities' responsibilities not just to society, but also to their students, their own staff, the disciplines they teach and their role as sites of systematic knowledge. Without such a vision, bright men and women will be less willing to teach and research there; bright young adults will want less to study there, and gain less from doing so; and society will benefit less and less, at levels not merely restricted to the narrowly economic. The vision we offer below is offered instead as a starting point for renegotiating a contract between university institutions, university staff, students, government and society. It is founded on a genuine commitment to responsibility.

Responsibility to students

What then might such a vision consist of? Some of its elements are exceptionally old. It would be facile to say that students arrive at university as children and leave as adults, but there is an important truth about the rite of passage that university provides for those young people who choose to attend. This is understood today, but often in absurdly narrow ways. It is not – contrary to the Confederation of British Industry's regular pronouncements – universities' function to produce men and women shrink-wrapped on exit for corporate workstations. It is universities' job to provide the space and the time in which teenagers can become adults.² This is partly a matter of technical training and instruction, equipping them with the ability to think critically in relation to various bodies of knowledge and disciplines.

It also means cultivating more global outlooks – specifically less 'Anglolexic' ones. In a global world, knowledge of other languages is a way of apprehending other cultures most immediately. Since successive governments of every hue have hollowed out foreign language teaching at schools, it seems important for universities to commit to rectifying this, insofar as they can. Universities should offer staff and students in all disciplines access to a range of languages, with the expectation that everyone will become familiar with at least one other modern language.

It is also a matter of socializing students more fundamentally, from classroom discussion to the range of extra-curricular activities for which

universities can provide the space and resources. Adults need to leave universities consequently prepared to think constructively about the – now multiple – identities they must strive to integrate in the contemporary world. British graduates have been living in Britain and Europe under a host of confessional banners – and none – for a long time now. Those identities are not becoming less important. Furthermore, many students will go on to work in institutions that are large enough to have their own, potentially global, reach. Equipping students to respond to others' identities and to develop their own – responsibly and civilly – must be an important job for universities. For centuries universities have provided, for those qualified and willing to learn, one of the most important rites of passage available to young people. Those 'qualified' are no longer just those coming from the right diocese, as was partly true in of medieval universities. Religion and gender are, by and large, no longer inhibiting factors. Still, today, much remains to be done though in removing barriers to full participation by all those with the potential to benefit from degree-level education, irrespective of their social background.

The result of all these developments has been to place complex demands on universities and there is no doubt that they could support students better than they currently do in negotiating their identities.³ This is to define a responsibility that universities have to society and to students themselves: that universities will provide them with safe and stimulating communities in which a large proportion of our most promising school-leavers can become thoughtful and engaged adults in our politics and our communities.

Responsibility to the integrity of knowledge

To achieve education to a worthwhile standard, and across the range of disciplines and subjects, society has a responsibility to protect the integrity of knowledge. Our disciplines, from Clio to Urania (History to Astronomy), have their claims. And without their mother, Memory herself, they are nothing. But memory is not enough. Knowledge that is not added to and reinterpreted in transmission is pickled not protected. The link between teaching and research is therefore not only vital to teaching energetically and ensuring the integrity of knowledge, it is also a way to ensure teachers themselves remain energized and engaged. There are many academics who will say that teaching first-year undergraduates

is an important way to keep your feet on the ground, as well as the most stimulating teaching you can do. So this idea of responsibility to knowledge entails allowing for the claims of all those working on these subjects, both students *and* teachers, if we are to ensure their sustained quality.

Universities must therefore be enabled to preserve, develop and transmit knowledge, in all its forms. A commitment to that is a deep and sane measure of the quality of any society, whether ‘big’ or not. If we believe this to be true in Britain, then it should be obvious that relying on student choices at degree level as the mechanism to fund them is to abdicate any responsibilities to those disciplines. Students who have just left school often have little reliable idea of what they will turn out to be interested in. The proposed new arrangement means they will be far less likely ever to find out. Lowest common denominators will prevent it: faced with the need to predict income streams, heads of departments will be ‘incentivized’ to remove less predictable or unusual courses, course ranges will shrink, and impoverishing ‘safety first’ cultures will prevail, in all but the best-financed and largest universities. Disciplines, students, teachers and diversity will all suffer.

It should be equally obvious that if we have any responsible commitment to the integrity of our disciplines and its experts then the attention of researchers should follow their insights more, not less. That is not compatible with ideas for funding regimes that follow predetermined national strategies or themes. It makes complete sense for particular (passing but intense) concerns to receive particular (passing but intense) funding. It makes no sense to require all research to contribute to these concerns, not least because there is no way of knowing what may be ‘relevant’ concerns tomorrow. If all today’s research has only attended to the concerns of the day, who will be equipped to research – or even recognize – the concerns of tomorrow? Genuine research is unpredictable. If any ‘relevance’ is foreseeable – rather than possible – then the researcher is either about to embark upon a piece of research that remains within the confines of what is already known or has already carried out the necessary research. To canonize ‘relevance’ as the only relevant criterion of deserving research is to encourage research that will date quickly.

Universities' responsibility to themselves

This responsibility to developing the integrity of knowledge turns out to be also a commitment to those who teach and research at universities. On this basis, people professionally dedicated to questioning, interpreting and making sense of the world would be given the responsibility to think, guided by the rigorous methods of their particular discipline, their ideas tested and debated by their peers. Some would pursue 'blue-skies research', others would seek to solve particular problems. Both approaches would accord each other respect in recognition of their mutual dependence.

But to produce both the sorts of responsibility described above requires that universities cultivate a further responsibility to themselves internally. This means finally abolishing the stagnant and disabling traces of the 'two cultures', arts and sciences, which do still persist in some universities. If universities are to live up to the vision we are developing here this is essential. Interdisciplinarity has been fashionable for some time now, but there remains much to be said for greater literacy – or numeracy – across disciplines. Sometimes this will be irrelevant, and problems will only be solved within robust and critical disciplinary perspectives. At other times we will need to step back from detailed consideration of our monitors, manuscripts or microscopes. Then it will be necessary to ask (say, in our own field) what should be the relationship between environmental history or forensic archaeology and the hard sciences of climate change if we wish to answer important questions about the historical relationship between human habitation, life chances and climatic change?

It is part of universities' responsibility to themselves in the long-run to create ways and spaces in which such work is made more, not less, likely. That is a challenge – we suspect – that not many universities have been successful in meeting. So universities need to develop critical consciences with respect to themselves. This is a responsibility they owe not only to their own development but also to those who underwrite them in society. Once again, 'student choice' will diminish a university's ability to discharge this responsibility, just in so far as universities are encouraged to be selective and no longer to embrace a broad range of subjects.

Responsibility to society

However, the point of developing such a critical conscience and consciousness is not that it should flourish only inside the academy as a way of proving our integrity. Such consciences need to feed back out into society.

The emphasis of many recent contributions to debates on higher education has been on the need for universities to be responsive to society. But it is a (partial) waste of the critical consciences we are advocating if they are only projected at those studying or working inside universities. This perspective has been encouraged by the view that universities should be the passive respondents to whatever ‘society’ wants them to respond. But the critical consciences that universities can develop should be prized also for their ability to instruct society about what universities have found to be important – and what universities think society should respond to (this is a corollary of the ‘relevance’ criticism above). Universities’ insights will often – should often, perhaps – be contrary to what society thinks, or thinks it wants to hear. This is not a vision of a Platonic world of guardians who determine and arbitrate their societies. It is a vision in which responsiveness is not fatuously construed as the perquisite of those outside of universities to demand of those inside universities. It is also a vision in which the boundaries of who is inside and outside of universities needs to be renegotiated, quite dramatically in some respects. This needs to go beyond the basics of ensuring that universities are places in which ‘the public’ is welcome and can come in to comprehend (comprehensibly) what it is that those inside universities can see. The responsibility and the responsiveness must flow in both directions if some genuine new contract between universities is to be the basis of a functional, rather than a dysfunctional, relationship.

This vision is one of a virtuous circle. Universities enable children to become adults, a responsibility to society and to students. To fully discharge that responsibility to students they need to preserve, develop and transmit an ever-increasing body of knowledge that helps us understand and live in our world – a responsibility to those bodies of knowledge themselves. Yet this task is quite obviously not one of rote copying. In order to attract very bright and creative people the act of transmitting knowledge will also be an act of recreating knowledge. If those people are to be kept where they can educate children then they must be given the freedom to determine the priorities and interests of

the research questions in their fields. To prescribe a priori what the development of knowledge must look like is by far the fastest route to ensure that what is one of Britain's great success stories will rapidly stagnate and produce ideological chaff, not intellectual wheat.

These responsibilities are to the disciplines and to the men and women who preserve and develop them – but they are also in the long term to the societies that can conceive of their value. To develop knowledge, though, universities must finally rid themselves of the hulks of the two cultures that still bureaucratically and architecturally litter their campuses. This is not to say that the overused term 'interdisciplinarity' is the salve for all ills, but it is to say that better, real, relationships between disciplines must be part of the basis for the integrated critical perspectives that we believe universities can offer. Finally, the vision described above is not one in which universities are passively 'responsive' to society, but instead actively contribute towards shaping and reshaping it. It is universities' final responsibility to challenge society itself. This vision is grounded in turning away from introverted panopticons, to more open universities, proud of the competencies, insights and value they embody and create within their disciplines and for society.

Towards open universities: from here to there

We are convinced that this vision of responsible universities is within reach, but conditions and expectations would have to change both in universities and in government, not to mention wider society. It is integral to the Prime Minister's vision of the Big Society that 'we've got to give professionals much more freedom'.⁴ In universities the trend is in the opposite direction. The two under-examined changes discussed at the start of this chapter are cases in point. The removal of the block teaching grant institutionalizes a market-driven deregulation where knowledge will live and die depending on student markets – not the disciplinary importance of given courses. Conversely, the abandonment of the independent 'Haldane principle' establishes the basis for re-regulating research funding in line with governmental priorities. To institutionalize these two opposed impulses is to embed schizophrenia into the bodies of universities. The only thing they have in common is that they reduce the ability of academics to teach what matters and to research what is important.

More bureaucratically, the boxes that academics are required to tick

keep on multiplying: teaching, research, publishing, knowledge transfer, public engagement, marketing, entrepreneurship. It becomes increasingly hard for academics to devote the time necessary to the slow, incremental work of teaching and research. If you turn universities into businesses you will not have universities any more. And the most successful businesses of the age – think of Google – operate on the basis that long-term productive commercial creativity is best secured by clearing space for research free from a concern with its immediate instrumentalization. How much truer should this be for universities? As we have said above, we do not advocate a return to the ivory tower, quite the opposite. Universities should become more open to society and to their local communities, but the *quid pro quo* must be that society becomes more open to universities and attaches more value to their intellectual and educational work. It is not only those who study for degrees who benefit from the presence of universities: it is everyone in society. As opposition MPs argued in the December 2010 House of Commons debate on tuition fees, it is not only when you send your children to school or drive on a motorway or go to the doctor or read a newspaper or make a phone call that you benefit from someone's university education – it's every time you turn on the tap.

We offer the following examples of the kinds of reorientation that will be required both within the academy and in the wider society. It is legitimate to criticize universities for a reluctance to communicate their ideas and knowledge to the general public. There are, indeed, some academics contemptuous of any such work and of their colleagues who do it, which is an attitude that should be rejected in all universities. It has to be recognized, however, that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), with its overwhelming emphasis on the value of research articles or monographs, has long made it impossible for academics to fulfil their 'research' contribution by writing popular works or even textbooks, so that those who wish to do them were obliged to do such work in addition to the requirements of the RAE. The 'Impact' agenda proposed for the Research Excellence Framework does little to address this problem, since it explicitly marginalizes academic or educational impact in favour of measurable economic impact. Since it is often more difficult and more time-consuming to synthesize a vast body of literature and to write it up in an accessible way than it is to carry out a piece of research, particularly if narrowly defined, then it is hardly surprising that many academics are reluctant to write for a general audience. There are other perverse effects.

Research that would make a good article gets written up as a book; short books are turned into long books in the hope that they will count as big books. But intellectually big books are discouraged, since they may well take longer than the assessment timeframe to produce. We are in danger of creating a world in which the big questions are never even asked, let alone answered.

It is also high time that journalists and others in public life stopped taking potshots at academics for the way that they write when they are writing for each other. All subjects have their own terminology, which can be used well to ensure conceptual clarity and precision, so that experts in the field know exactly what they are talking about, or can be used badly to mask poor thinking. Many of the debates in arts, humanities and social sciences turn upon terminology. It is an important element of the rigour of academic disciplines. To cite, out of context, a piece of academic jargon, written to be read by other academics, and to extrapolate from that the conclusion that academics are not interested in writing for a general audience, is wholly unfair. After all, you would surely not expect a brain surgeon to use the same language in a research paper as they would use when explaining to a patient what it means to have a brain tumour.

Academics share this responsibility, though. Academic life is tribal, and that has cost us dear. Even faced with the severity of the cuts, academics find it difficult to unite, even – perhaps especially – those from within the same subject. To take examples from the two fields we know best: cultural historians, theoretically inclined, often devote more energy to dismissing supposedly ‘empiricist’ military historians than they do to combating the debased idea of history as a mere adjunct to citizenship classes. Area studies people argue about exactly what is implied by the term instead of focusing on the fact that however it is defined it is being closed down across the country. Too often a legitimate concern about precision of language prevents academics from saying anything convincing to policy-makers. There are both good and bad reasons for academic tribalism: disciplines lose their edge if there is no vigilance over them; it is through comparative methodologies that rigorous approaches to evidence are preserved and developed; academics have now experienced over three decades of being compelled to compete for resources and all the incentives operate in favour of intensively working a small plot of earth rather than attempting to survey a field, let alone looking over the horizon to other lands.

Divisions occur not only by disciplinary fault-lines, but also between individuals who see themselves as pure researchers and others who communicate to a wider audience, often dismissed as ‘popularizers’; between pre- and post- 1992 universities; between university managements and the majority of academic staff. Throughout the university sector, many people are manipulating the rules of the game to their own best advantage. ‘Star’ academics move from one fellowship to the next with the result that they hardly ever actually teach or even go to the institutions that pay their salaries and whose RAE ratings they are employed to improve. It is a zero-sum game, in which the person who did not win a fellowship will end up doing extra work to compensate for the absence of the lucky one who did. All of these everyday problems have to be understood at least partly as the consequences of the perverse incentives created by government policies, but there is no doubt that the collusion of academics has made it easier for policy-makers to divide and rule. And the tendency of at least some academics to affect lofty disdain for those beyond the ivory tower has also played into the hands of those who have a political interest in tapping the deep vein of anti-intellectualism that runs through Middle England. It would not have been so easy for Mrs Thatcher to score a cheap point by attacking the ‘cloister and the common room’ for denigrating the creators of wealth in Britain had there not been an element of truth in what she said. It would be welcome to see more academics doing more to challenge such attitudes.

Under the new social contract for universities there will still be a role for the state to play in ensuring accountability; the challenge will be to design ways of stimulating what Onora O’Neill (2002) has called ‘intelligent accountability’. She means conditions in which there are obligations to tell the truth; in which people think less about their rights (what they should get) and more about their responsibilities (what they should do); in which agency means not just choosing one constrained option over another, but, rather, being a position to have a meaningful say about the values and practices that shape their environment. Conditions, in short, in which perverse incentives, such as those created by the RAE, are avoided.⁵ And universities need to grasp the nettle of what to do about people who are not very good at their jobs, not by multiplying the performance indicators that all too often allow the mediocre to tick enough boxes to stay in post, but by establishing rigorous reviews, perhaps at five-yearly intervals, throughout an academic career.

Conclusion

If we are to break out of the inspection-house and reclaim the university as a place in which academics, students and other interested parties can devote themselves to learning, critical reflection and debate, there needs to be a widespread recognition across society of the value of the academic freedom that is about to be destroyed. It is in the capacity of intellectuals to interpret and make sense of the world, and to question received truths, that their true value lies. The English language lacks a generic noun for intellectual work, or the systematic development of knowledge and understanding, which is captured so well in the German term *Wissenschaft*. ‘Science’ served the purpose until the 1830s, but then experimentalists coined the term ‘scientist’ and a general term became one for denoting the natural sciences. Another German term conveys what intellectuals do: *Sinnstiftung*. Tellingly untranslatable it means interpreting and making sense of the world.

The conditions of the twenty-first century create important opportunities for universities: to focus on thinking dispassionately, critically and rigorously, untrammelled by the illusions of universal reason and national culture; to ask big questions and to help answer them by overcoming artificial divides, such as those between the humanities and the sciences or between specialists and generalists; to democratize, both in terms of participation and in terms of institutional openness; and to open up new channels for two-way communication with society. With a new contract between the universities and the state, based on responsibility, trust and intelligent accountability, the British higher education sector could become genuinely open, democratic and international – in short, fit for the demands of the twenty-first century. Can Britain really afford not to take these opportunities?